

## Weatherlore

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(Connecticut)

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WRITER Francis Donovan

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Longevity

Francis Donovan

Thomaston, Connecticut

December 19, 1938

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Today's light snowstorm reminds Mr. Botsford of the snows of yesteryear and he expresses the belief that "they don't have the snow and the winters any more" they had when he was young. His reminiscence inevitably centers on the big blizzard of '88. Says he:

"The 10th of March fell on a Saturday, I believe, and it was the most beautiful spring day you ever saw. Lots of people went to Waterbury or New Haven to spend the week-end and everybody was glad that winter was over.

"We went to church Sunday night and when we came out it had started to snow. It snowed all night, heavy, but the next morning people went to the shop as usual. I didn't carry no dinner and my father didn't either. When noon came, my father says, 'Art I'm not goin' home, but you go on home.' So I did.

"The snow at noon was just like that snow we had four years ago--just as deep. And the thermometer was at zero or lower, all the time, and it was blowing hard. I clim over a couple of fences, on my way home. I got down by J. C. Spencer's store, and old J.C. and some other feller was standin' in the doorway, and there was a drift up as high as their heads outside.

"That afternoon the Clock Company team with a big sled took all the girls home. Jim Blaine was drivin' and when he took the girls over to the Yellow Row, over on Chapel street, the drifts was so deep he could hardly turn the horses around.

"I couldn't see ten feet ahead of me, comin' home that afternoon. Snow was up to my waist. Father got home ahead of 2 me, but how he did it, I don't know. He must have passed me on the way, and neither one of us knew it. It kept snowin' all day Tuesday, and Wednesday when I went up town there was a drift way over your head clear from the town hall across to Woodruff's house. The boys had dug tunnels to get in and out of the Hose house.

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"Them people that had gone out of town to spend the weekend never got home till Thursday afternoon, when the first train pulled into the depot over here. Old Dwight Cornell, who lived up on Hickory hill where Schinzel lives now, he stopped in one of those houses on Litchfield street, used to call it the Mill house, and he never got home till Thursday mornin'.

"Warren Westwood and Bill Woods, who lived up in Harwinton, and used to drive team down here to work, they started out Monday noon. They bought a snow shovel, and they said by God they'd get through. They got stuck in a big drift miles from home. One of them got the horse out and got on his back and the other took hold of the horses' tail. They hadn't got very far this way when the horse dropped dead. They plodded on, makin' their way the best they could by what landmarks they could recognize. They clim over stone walls, and dead trees and fell down I don't know how many times, and they was damn near exhausted.

"You heard how people get when they're in that condition. Westwood wanted to lay down and rest. But Woods, his son-in-law, he pinched him and slapped him, made him keep on his feet.

"They finally got to the barn of their house. And they found 3 that the neighbors had been over and took care of the cows and locked the barn. Now Woods got discouraged, and he wanted to lay down by the barn, and Westwood, it was his turn to do the pinchin' and slappin'. They made their way to the house at last and fell up against the door and Mrs. Woods opened it and dragged 'em both inside. They was both in bad shape. Had their fingers and ears and nose and their chins frozen. It was three weeks before either of them came to work again.

"And that was only a sample of what people went through.

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"Nobody died here, that I remember. They pulled a few out of snowdrifts. In the cities a lot died. That was the worst snowstorm there ever was. And it was such beautiful weather before -- nobody could realize what was comin'.

"Oh, yes, I guess this hurricane last fall took more lives and did more property damage. It was a worse catastrophe, no doubt about it. But back in eighty-eight we was cut off from everything. We depended on the railroad for supplies.

"It wasn't no time at all before the fresh meat in the stores was exhausted, and then the canned meat and the salt meat. The first milkmen that got through was besieged with people offering 25 to 50 cents a quart for milk. Some sold out for what they could get. Others were faithful to their customers and wouldn't give it to nobody else. And these were the ones that benefitted in the long run, for them that deserted their customers were 4 remembered for it when the snow was all gone and people wouldn't buy from them.

"I went to church the next Sunday, I remember, the sun was shinin' nice and bright, and over at Burr Reed's market in the center, just as church was over, a sled owned by Ralph N. Blakeslee of Waterbury drove up with a supply of meat. The butchers and the meat cutters was in church --they was more church goin' people than there is today --and they went over and opened up the store and the people flocked in and they began to sell meat --Sunday or no Sunday.

"That Ralph N. Blakeslee was quite a man -- I see him drive a team of 36 horses once -- had men on each side of them watchin' just like in a circus parade. He used to give all the kids in Waterbury a free sleigh ride every year, too.

"That ain't talkin' about the blizzard, is it? The snow hung on for a long time. I see some on the green in New Haven in June, that year. They threw some off the wharves down there, and some they piled up on the green, and there it stayed, in a big frozen heap.

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“Course that was an extreme example --that will prob'ly never happen again. But they don't have the winters they used to. In the winter of sixty-eight, my uncle worked drivin' for Aaron Thomas then --they had a span of nice horses and a two seater bob--he took the whole Thomas family up around Northfield for a drive. There was Aaron, and the sons and old Grandma Thomas, Seth's wife, --all of them. The snow was deep, but it was cold, so cold that a crust had formed over the top of it as solid as ice. They didn't 5 have to follow the road --they could go anywhere in the fields over that crust without sinkin' through, what do you think of that. Ever see anything like that in your time?

“Another winter, I remember there was a crust formed like that on the lot down across from this house. And there was at least two hundred people came up with sleds -- not only children--there was adults too -- and they slid till midnight. And that lot up back of Sanford Avenue [hat?] got froze over --I see about 500 people up there one night.

“They had bob sleds for regular slidin' --used to slide down High street and go clear to the Case shop --used to slide down Hickory Hill and go clear to the Post Office. And I see skating on the Marine shop pond at Thanksgiving time --wasn't nothing unusual.

“Yessir, I think the weather goes in cycles-like. We had periods of weather when it was 32 to 36 degrees below. One year, I can't tell you just when --we had 17 mornin's out of the 28 in February when it was below zero. And we used to take the Connecticut Post, and I remember how they said one year they had 123 days of sleighing in Hartford.

“Many a time the first snow would come before Thanksgiving and would be the last to go. We ain't had any of those long, continuous winters with the hard crusted snow in a long while. In my experience, February has been the severest month in the year. It's a month the old folks dread--for it's a month that 6 carries away many of 'em. I can remember how they used to be afraid of it --and it was always true that a lot of them went durin' February. Their vitality was low, I suppose and their blood was thin.

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"I think the next generation or so you'll see an increase in the longevity of folks. Think you'll see a lot of them livin' past eighty and ninety. Used to be three score and ten, they said, that was man's allotted span, - look at me, I'm seventy-seven and goin' strong.

"Hard work might've had somethin' to do with cuttin' 'em down in the old days. I ain't sayin'--I don't set up to be no authority on anything --but they did work hard. Eleven hours a day in the shop --women worked 14 for two dollars and a half a week--then come home --the men would, -and have to cut and pile wood.

"Had to buck-saw everything. Work for a couple of hours splittin' it, an' pilin' it and then make a roarin' fire in the wood stoves and keep all the blinds shut and doors tight closed to keep the heat in. Because you had to get up to a cold house in the mornin', unless you woke up in the middle of the night and poked up the fires. If you didn't, you had to get up and build one about five o'clock in the mornin' so's breakfast could be cooked.

"There was my father. He got apprenticed to Sam Sanford over here in his shop when he was just a boy. His home was in South Britain. And every Saturday night him and his brother would 7 walk home, and every Sunday night they'd walk back. They worked --the men did --and so'd the women. No conveniences, no electric irons and washers and all them doodads. Not even coal--imagine a life like that if you can. That's why I say longevity should increase.

"That is, if the damn fool people will live sensible and not abuse themselves too much --drink and smoke too much --and play too much. But I don't pretend to be able to see into the future, I wouldn't guarantee it."

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